

## **About Gail Konop Baker**

**Author of**  
**CANCER IS A BITCH:**  
***Or, I'd Rather Be Having a Midlife Crisis***  
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I am a columnist (on hiatus) for LiteraryMama.com, a freelance essayist, an award winning short story writer and poet, a competitive runner, an occasional yoga instructor, a mother of three, and a breast cancer survivor.

At 16, I went to college where I studied literature and decided I wanted to be a writer. By 18, I was a published poet. By 20, I won my first writing award and was anthologized. But I was writing poetry and I knew that wasn't practical, so after college I moved to New York City where I figured I'd be discovered for some unforeseen talent and make my fortune. I worked at Telerep (the producers of Star Search) where I honed a very fine imitation of my supervisor, which eventually got me fired from that job, but hired as a stand-up comic in Chelsea. The problem was that the imitation wasn't funny unless you knew the supervisor. After that I decided I would be a famous actress, so I studied acting at the Stella Adler studio, where I discovered how much I sucked at acting. And how talented I was at waitressing.

I was waiting tables to pay my rent, when I met my future husband, a WASPY oxford cloth wearing Dartmouth graduate, heading to medical school the following year. Not my type at all. But we fell in love anyway and both got jobs at Park West High School in Hell's Kitchen. We were too naïve to worry much about the metal detectors at every entrance, the hallways we were told to avoid, the rapes and assaults in the bathrooms. And our students loved and protected us. It was sort of like *To Sir With Love* without Sidney Poitier.

The following year we moved to Hanover, New Hampshire, for my husband's medical training. I was hired to teach high school English in Windsor, Vermont, an old, run-down, mill town where most of my students were stoned and the chairman of my department was a raging alcoholic. This was the town next to the town where it was rumored J.D. Salinger was holed up (whom, I swear, I saw at the grocery store once). I started a masters program at Dartmouth, left the teaching position at the end of the year, and was hired as an advertising executive for a television station (I really wanted to be the anchor but not having any experience kind of got in the way), where I sold, wrote, directed and performed in television ads. After I gave birth to our first child, and my husband graduated from medical school, I stayed home and started writing again. Then the years start to blur...two more children...my husband's residency (100-120 hour work weeks), and nine moves before we ended up in Madison, Wisconsin. The one constant was my writing.

In my early forties, after the kids were finally in school, and the short story publications and awards started rolling in, my right boob turned on me. Seven biopsies in five years, the last one ductal carcinoma in situ.

Two and a half years ago, a few weeks after surgery, I kissed and waved my children off to school and thought I should go to my desk and either revise my novel or send out some queries or start a new novel, but instead I sat by the window and stared at the split rail fence and counted knots. My body was knitting itself back together and I was thankful my cancer was caught early, was non-invasive, that the surgeon got clean margins, that I was regaining my energy, doing all the mother things I always did, but inside, I felt numb, paralyzed, utterly confused about who I was. I didn't recognize the skin that covered the flesh that harbored my tainted cells. I didn't know how to be me.

I felt as if the diagnosis revealed the mortal flaw I had managed to hide all these years. As if I had no right to be a part of the healthy world that I had crossed over from, to the unlucky side. No means, no memory of how to throw my head back and laugh, really laugh again. I thought about the future, the one I'd imagined with me launching my children and myself, my world widening after years of driving the car pool, living a life that revolved around other people's lives. Waiting for my turn. And I saw myself at the mercy of the medical world, me and my medication with all its worrisome side effects, me and my fear of recurrence, of letting my children down, of burdening those around me, of forever being The Woman Who Had Breast Cancer and the pity it inspired. I'd lost my voice. I had nothing left to say.

So I stared out the window while the kids were at school and watched the late winter wind rattle the trees and picked up my pen and snapped it on and off and on and scribbled in my journal, my hand shaking as the words poured out about my mammogram and core biopsy and lumpectomy and sitting topless in the oncologist's office on Valentine's Day and worrying that at the best I'd live a terrified existence from doctor's appointment to doctor's appointment, in six month increments, and at the worst I'd die and abandon my children when that was the one thing I had always been determined not to do, and I wept and curled into a fetal ball and fell asleep and dreamt about my old black Lab and my old self and woke up startled that this cancer thing wasn't just a nightmare.

Those words, culled from my journal, were the seeds that inspired my *Bare-breasted Mama* column, which in turn inspired **CANCER IS A BITCH**.

And as much as the whole cancer thing really sucks, I have to admit that the sense of urgency it spawns, is a kick-ass motivator. **No time to lose.**

**To schedule an interview with Gail Konop Baker, contact Angela Hayes, Goldberg McDuffie Communications, 212-446-5104, ahayes@goldbergmcduffie.com**